

Kaia Stern, *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing*. London & New York: Routledge, 2014, 215pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-81939-8, (hbk).

In *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education and Healing*, Kaia Stern endeavours to put a human face on the contemporary punishment crisis to present readers with an opportunity to listen to and learn from the voices of people who have lived experiences of incarceration.

This publication gives those with an interest in restorative justice an opportunity to consider how we conceive of restorative justice as a broad concept. The common misunderstanding that restorative justice is defined in itself by victim-offender mediation can negate thinking more accurately about restorative justice as a response to crime. Although the reparation process involved in restorative justice practices often involves both victim and perpetrator, such practices do occur within prisons whereby prisoners engage in courses, such as victim awareness, to enable them to consider in more depth the consequences of their actions. It could be argued however that within other educational courses (not specific to victim awareness) the tenets of restorative justice can also be identified; namely an emphasis on the power of dialogue (in class), facilitation of the reparation of the wrongdoer (by educators) and the principle of voluntariness (in taking part in the course). Stern's example of the study of faith enables readers themselves to identify how the defining characteristics of restorative processes can be seen in other educational programmes.

Stern introduces this fascinating and important book by explaining to the reader her experiences of being in the prison environment; her first memory being as a college senior in the United States visiting Green Haven maximum security men's prison in Stormville as part of the Vasser/Green Haven internship programme (which focuses on building bridges between college students and activist-scholars in prison). This experience was the beginning of Stern's 20-year journey working with various communities "on the inside" which spanned 12 prisons in four American states. Stern begins by openly reflecting on the effect of the prison environment on her personally explaining to the reader that her heart begins to pound every time she walks through the first metal detector, despite having taught college courses in prison for ten years.

Describing the prison as a 'shameful environment', Stern immediately introduces the reader to her perspective that the suffering experienced by the incarcerated is the same regardless of the penal institution or the state where it is located.

Stern argues in this book that faith has been largely overlooked by those in academia who are committed to prison reform and she presents religion as an ideological paradox given that its practice can simultaneously save and damn, heal and harm, and free and yoke (p. 2). With this in mind, the intended audience for this book includes but should by no means be limited to educators, policy makers, activists, penal reformers and academics. Given the apparent surge in interest in education in prisons, it is clear that there is an audience for this publication on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond.

This book is set in the context of the current penal crisis which Stern describes as being rooted in a cultural ideology that afflicts psyches and institutions. She proposes that this culture is 'mesmerized' by the myth (rooted in its religious ideology) that violence can redeem and that wounds can be healed through isolation and retribution causing the use of violence to be seen as the execution of justice.

Stern draws on interviews she conducted with six graduates of the Master of Professional Studies in Ministry (MPS) programme at Sing Sing prison (discussed in some detail in Chapter 4), all of whom were seminarians actively engaged in theological discipline. She explores how the MPS programme supports and fosters transformation in the lives of these students and how religion and education were inextricably bound in the sample of men interviewed. The Master's programme at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York State offers theological education which fosters critical thinking and uses humanizing pedagogical practices creating fellowship and relation amongst the students. Given that the meaningful relationships these men had with both theology and education existed prior to their time in prison, the MPS programme, according to Stern, does not humanize the men nor create their faith practices, but rather provides a community in which they can reconnect with their own and each other's humanity.

The self-reflective approach taken by Stern in this work is evident from the outset. Whether referring to this approach as auto-ethnography, cultural research from the self or reciprocal ethnography, Stern evidently values this method and reflects on making an effort to hold herself accountable to the practice of never asking others what she is not willing to provide herself. Other prisons researchers, namely Liebling and Jewkes, have addressed the place of this approach in criminology in recent years paving the way for the continued acceptability and importance of embedding the identity and emotion of the researcher in such work; an approach that I myself as a prisons researcher have felt imperative to adopt. Moving beyond this, Stern notes that she co-theorized with interviewees allowing the often-silent voices of incarcerated individuals to be 'heard' with some volume in this book.

The outcome of the 19 interviews conducted with graduates of the MPS programme (which were conducted in the community) is explored throughout the six chapters of the book interwoven with theoretical application and inference. Stern pays close attention to the extensive failings of the US penal system explaining the 'institutionalized apartheid' (p.19) that has been created. To illustrate, she confronts the striking reality that 37% of African American men under 35 who drop out of high school will serve time in the punishment system. By listening to the voices of her participants, Stern reveals the process of resistance to dehumanization as a transformative experience in a system plagued by dehumanization in mass quantities.

Stern herself critiques the fact that the men interviewed do not represent the prison population as a whole given that the vast majority of people in prison cannot read or write at high school level and do not participate in vocational programmes. Some interviewees in fact had acquired a considerable number of college credits. It is perhaps necessary however to focus on such individuals given Stern's goal to challenge the prevailing myth that people in prison are 'other', evil, and inhuman and that faith and participation in post-secondary education can be 'the embers for resistance and transformation' (p. 31). Stern also importantly comments on the link between faith and scrutiny in post 9/11 society by recalling the experience of a Muslim participant who was placed in solitary confinement for three days for taping a map of Canaan (his territory) on his cell wall that he had taken from a copy of *National Geographic*. She explores the religious roots of punishment to argue how

notions of sin and evil shape our relationship to crime and who gets punished showing that the history of the US prison system is directly tied to traditional Christian theology which tends to demonize 'the other' (p. 76). In this context, Stern argues for the need to halt the ineffective pendulum swing between retribution and rehabilitation.

Navigating the reader through key concepts of adaptation and institutionalization, the participants' voices provide a necessary and frequent segway into experiences of affirmation of humanity and transformation despite the overbearing forces that dehumanize. Stern determines that without the intense discipline of introspection that faith provides, the experience of isolation and social death can devastate body, spirit and mind. As such, Stern draws on the words of Goffman to determine that strong religious convictions can and do insulate the believer (and indeed the incarcerated student) against the assaults of the total institution. Stern explains through the experiences of her participants that this insulation extends beyond time in prison and serves to shelter those released from the stigma-riddled community that awaits them. It also encourages them to become involved in work that supports others being released from penal institutions showing an extension of such restorative work.

Stern highlights the potency with which experiences of a faith journey, theology or post-secondary education (or indeed all of the aforementioned) have the power to transform individual lives and communities through resistance to dehumanization. She acknowledges, much to the suspected delight of my fellow prison education researcher colleagues in the UK, that access to higher education is an essential factor in the fight to reduce recidivism, yet barriers still remain.

This book draws on insightful empirical data to successfully drive forward the message that education in prison can reduce crime, make communities safer, transform experiences of dehumanization, isolation and social death, and create an opportunity to withstand the spirit of punishment. For those with a specific interest in restorative justice, which facilitates communication between offenders and victims to instigate a process of healing, this book focuses on the transformative and healing outcomes of education and can be seen to show how education experiences can contribute to the restoration of the individual offender's humanity. This is a central

aspect of restorative justice processes given the humanization that occurs when the victim comes to see the offender as a person.

As a fellow prison education researcher from ‘across the pond’, it is extremely encouraging to realize through this book that regardless of location, those who have researched prison education by valuing the experiential expertise of prisoner and ex-prisoner participants, are coming to the same conclusions; that education in prisons has the power to be transformative, restorative and humanizing, and enables incarcerated people to establish or re-establish a sense of their own identity and humanity. If prisons cannot implement initiatives such as those discussed in this book, the plague of mass incarceration is certain to continue to impact the lives of all of those affected by the damaging effects of the penal institution.

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